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A quick reference aid on U.S. foreign relations
Not a comprehensive policy statement
Bureau of Public Affairs • Department of State

World Food Security — March 1986

Background: According to international experts, as many as half a billion people suffer from hunger and malnutrition. The US response to world hunger stems in large measure from characteristic American generosity and humanitarianism. We also have substantial economic and political interests in contributing to regular and adequate food supplies for the world's population. Our record is strong in each major area of world food security: food aid, grain reserves, and agricultural development assistance.

Food aid: The US is the largest donor of food aid. Each year we have pledged a minimum of 4.47 million tons of a 10 million-ton target of cereals aid under the Food Aid Convention, and our actual annual contributions have exceeded our pledge. For example, in the July 1984-June 1985 period, the US provided more than 7 million metric tons of food aid (grain equivalent) to hungry people around the world. In addition to our PL 480 "Food for Peace" program, the US makes available government stocks of butter, cheese, and nonfat dry milk for donation overseas to people in need. Although our bilateral food aid program is substantial, the US also is the largest contributor to the World Food Program (WFP), a specialized UN multilateral organization providing food aid. In 1985 the US pledged $250 million to WFP for the 1985-86 biennium.

Grain reserves: Adequate national and global stocks provide vital assurance that food will be available to meet year-to-year fluctuations in grain production. The US is the only nation with a conscious policy of acquiring grain when supplies are abundant. When released, these reserves are available to foreign grain buyers on the same basis as domestic buyers. In addition to huge farmer-owned grain reserves, the US maintains a Food Security Wheat Reserve to underwrite the US food aid commitment even in situations of tight domestic supply. To help ensure world food security, the US has urged other nations to build food reserves. The International Wheat Council, composed of grain importers and exporters, including the US, provides a valuable forum to discuss food reserves and other issues concerning cereals.

Agricultural development assistance: The US and many other developed and developing countries believe that the key to food security is increased food production in the developing countries. The US encourages this by providing assistance to help developing countries address the longer term problems of increasing agricultural production. We are the largest bilateral donor of such assistance. In fiscal year 1985 alone, in an effort to help developing countries help themselves, we contributed more than $750 million for agricultural and rural development and nutrition programs in developing countries. Our assistance emphasizes small-farm, labor-intensive agriculture, an area where progress is vital if the lives of the rural poor are to improve.

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The US also supports agricultural development by significant contributions to the multilateral development banks, such as the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and the Asian Development Bank, which in the last several years have devoted a substantial portion of their resources to the food and agricultural sector. Our support of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization and the Consultative Group for International Agricultural Research also contributes to agricultural development in the developing world. In addition, the US actively participates in the World Food Council and the International Fund for Agricultural Development.

External assistance, however, is not a substitute for appropriate agricultural policies. The US encourages developing countries to increase their investment in agriculture and to provide incentives, especially price incentives, to farmers, as well as incentives for increased private sector involvement in food storage, distribution, and marketing. Developing countries also need to develop their human resources and institutional capabilities in science and technology and food and agricultural research. Despite progress in these areas, many developing countries--particularly the poorest--may have to rely heavily for some time on concessional assistance from the international community.

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